

# Common Ground

paintings by  
Jo Bertini



Land of Kachchh  
205x205cm oil on canvas on vintage Wedding Shawl 2016

LIVING LIGHTLY





All artworks © Jo Bertini

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Jo Bertini

2nd-18th December  
2016

LIVING LIGHTLY



Indira Gandhi National Centre of the Arts  
Rajendra Prasad Road, New Delhi, India



इन्दिरा गांधी राष्ट्रीय कला केंद्र  
INDIRA GANDHI NATIONAL CENTRE FOR THE ARTS



My work is interested in the transformative and reciprocal nature of desert landscapes, places of wilderness which inspire in some people a particular type of connection to country. It is more than a way of living or a spiritual restorative, it is a deeper type of nourishment, a symbiotic and intricate relationship to the natural world which offers a sense of personal identity and meaning. The Maldhari herders of Kachchh, the Rann and Rajasthan regions of far north-west India are some of the last truly authentic exemplifiers of this inclusive relationship. My artworks in this exhibition are informed by bearing witness to their desert migrations and the resulting riches of cultural creativity that is the legacy of their lives.

The ancient idea of nomadism, of walking the land with animals according to the terrain, the ecology, and the daily and seasonal rhythms is a very intimate gathering of knowledge, an environmental Ground Truth. It is also a fundamental human instinct as important as that of story and myth in the human psyche. Today, however, it is less and less possible for the world's desert peoples to move freely across their traditional lands and routes. Many rights of passage have been lost and living on these lands is becoming increasingly complicated and fraught with dangers. Under intensifying pressures on their way of life in the wake of technology driven global development, the Maldhari have exhibited a remarkable tenacity that is a testament to the cultural and spiritual importance of this people-place relationship and the human desire for this intricate connection to the natural world. The real value of their lives is not only in their inherent understanding of the land, but also the living link they provide to historic indigenous worlds. They offer a completely original contradiction to the global corruption and homogenisation of art and culture.

In Australia there is a direct living link to this nomadic spirit and cultural heritage of the Maldhari that stretches back to 1860 when camels were first brought to the continent from India for inland explorations in the central deserts. Although the cameleering tradition is a threatened heritage worldwide, I have spent the last ten years as an Expedition Artist walking into remote empty inland country alongside a traditional camel string. I gather my knowledge on foot, reaching deep into the whole context of the land, alert to all the details it holds. There are still things that only the human eye can see and only the human hand can record. My role as an artist is to not only represent what is seen, but also the unseen.

I have discovered that the people-place relationship to desert landscapes is very particular. There is a certain instinct that nomadism, walking and living lightly on these lands inspires. As a fellow desert traveller, the opportunity to know and work with the Maldhari and their culture was an invaluable experience. We share a special affinity, a collegiality through our relationship to desert lands and our instinctive artistic compulsions. The experience has given me a much more profound understanding of the importance of my own contribution in describing the elusive primary sense that lies in the alliance to the natural world. It has illuminated the extraordinary value of the art and cultural material that flows from some of the most seemingly harsh and inhospitable places on the planet.

Jo Bertini  
November 2016





Raika Maldhari- Sadri  
150x98cm oil on canvas on vintage Dowry Bag 2016





Lachuben Rabari- Old and New  
130x92cm oil on canvas on vintage Wedding Shawl 2016





Night Desert Kachchh  
150x150cm oil on canvas on vintage Wedding Shawl 2016





Jat Maldhari with Baby Goat  
112x84cm oil on canvas on vintage Dowry Bag 2016





Travelling the Little Rann  
150x150cm oil on canvas on vintage Wedding Shawl 2016





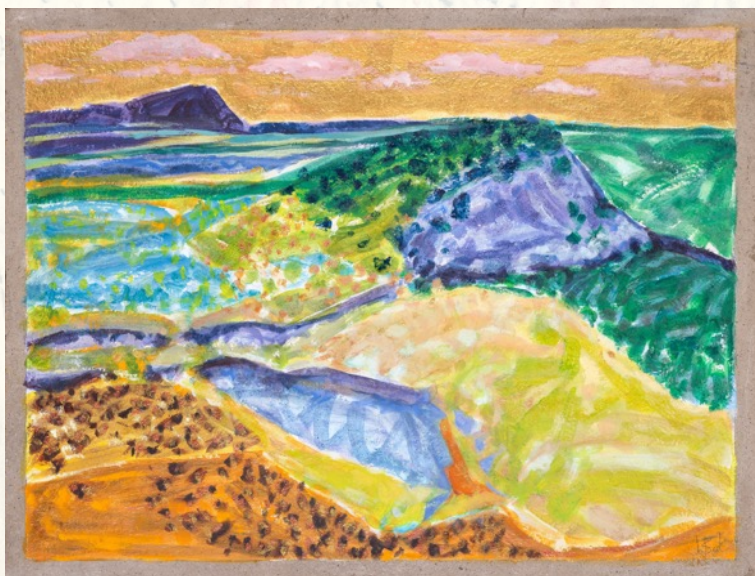
Raika Mother  
118x90cm oil on canvas on vintage Dowry Bag 2016



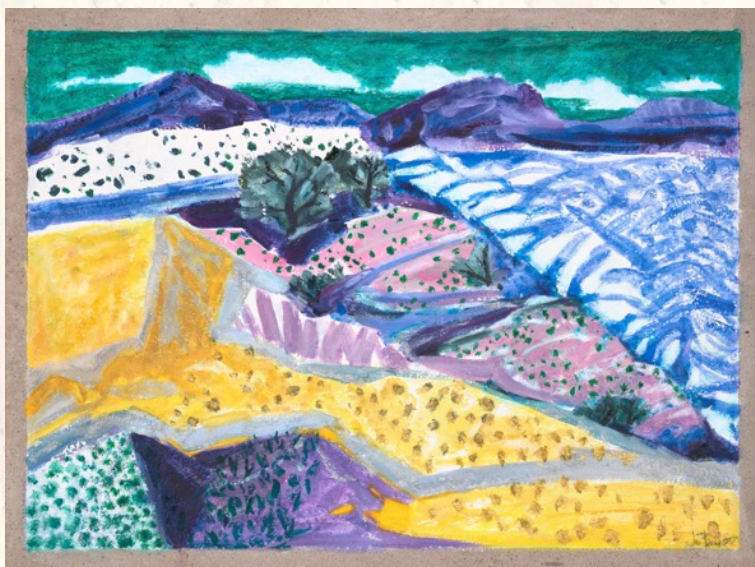


Jat Maldhari and Camels- Great Rann of Kachchh  
150x98cm oil on canvas on vintage Dowry Bag 2016





Banni Grasslands  
60x79cm Gouache on handmade camel paper 2016



Aravali Range- Rajasthan  
60x79cm Gouache on handmade camel paper 2016





Jat Maldhari - Banni  
120x94cm oil on canvas on vintage Dowry Bag 2016





Kachchhi Camel  
60x42cm Gouache on paper 2016



Natives- Pariah Dog and Leopard, Rajasthan  
60x42cm Gouache on paper 2016



Night Grazing Banni Buffalo  
60x42cm Gouache on paper 2016





Dhebariya Rabari  
137x81cm oil on canvas on vintage Dowry Bag 2016





Hodka Maldhari  
42x60cm Gouache on paper 2016



Sadri Mother and Child  
42x60cm Gouache on paper 2016



Rabari Camp- Edge of the Rann  
42x60cm Gouache on paper 2016



Water Gatherers- Chhari Dhand  
42x60cm Gouache on paper 2016



Raika Camel Camp  
42x60cm Gouache on paper 2016



Kharai Camel - Mangroves, Bachau  
42x60cm Gouache on paper 2016





Jat Maldhari Girl- Chhari Dhand  
122x115cm oil on canvas on vintage Dowry Bag 2016





Textiles play an intrinsic part in Maldhari life. Imbued with a legacy reaching far back in time and place, woven, stitched, stamped and dyed cloth are outer expressions of enduring values. The woolen shawl of a Rabari woman protects her from the harsh environment, affords her modesty within family mores and defines her status within the community. A stitched camel bag is an ode to the land, to the animals and to work. A dowry bag is impregnated with skill and symbolises the creativity that a bride brings to married life. The flamboyant floral scarf worn by Jat herders defies geographic boundaries, and the embroidered yokes of traditional dress are markers of identity, repositories of knowledge and vehicles that carry the past into the future. In Maldhari life where nothing is immutable and adaptation and evolution mean survival, textiles, whether utilitarian, ceremonial or simply decorative, may be seen as inseparable from the people from which they spring.

The textiles that frame the artworks by Jo Bertini were sourced from traditional communities throughout Kutch and Rajasthan. They were procured by her in the field; in villages, market places and from private collections. Each piece was carefully selected to reverberate with the work and to unite an Australian perspective with deep rooted Indian traditions.

I was honoured when the Australian High Commission invited me to facilitate Jo Bertini's field trip into the camel territories of India. This is the 'turf' I know and love and it was a privilege to travel with an artist of Jo's calibre and be witness to her immediate rapport with Maldhari communities. Amongst the many great memories I have of this journey there are two that stand out; the first is Jo surrounded by awestruck camel herders at the Pushkar Camel Mela as she drew their animals with such speed and skill, and the second is watching Jo interact with a young Jat Maldhari during our foray into the remote mangroves where Kharai camels swim across the sea. His meeting with a woman who also worked with camels and understood his challenges transcended time and space. And for this moment in time, two distinctly different cultures created common ground.

Carole Douglas





Jo Bertini is an award winning, established Australian artist. She is a painter, art educator, lecturer and writer. She is known internationally for her paintings and drawings of desert landscapes, people and animals. Her work has been acquired by private and public collections both nationally and internationally and is on display in many public art galleries, museums and institutions. She has a history of thirty years as a professional exhibiting artist. Her paintings have been curated in hundreds of solo, group and touring exhibitions, including exhibitions in Australia, China, Malaysia, USA and India. She has been widely published and reproduced and her work is included in films and television documentaries and programs. She has been awarded many art prizes, commissions and public art installations for museums, corporations and city councils and many unique international artist residencies. For ten years she worked as an Expedition Artist on scientific and ecological survey expeditions into the most remote and inaccessible desert regions of Australia. A published art book, 'Fieldwork - Jo Bertini' celebrates her long and intimate engagement with the Australian desert. She continues to focus her artistic interests on desert people and places, painting and working in some of the most remote and inaccessible desert regions of the world.

*I've watched Jo at work- the first time was when I met her in the desert. It was transporting. She takes what she sees, concentrates it and renders it until it becomes a symbolic place, a symbolic desert. They're like the sort of places I sometimes get to in a dream and recognise in a dream and feel at home in. When she is painting the desert I feel she is painting something that is within me and then it's layered with all kinds of symbols as deserts are in aboriginal culture and obviously in our culture as well that feeling of transcendence. They have that quality- that quality that lifts them out of being mere beautiful representations of the desert. They have a bigger meaning. (Robyn Davidson, Writer)*

*It is only possible to paint the desert with knowledge. Jo Bertini has been very fortunate in going into the desert repeatedly and in the company of men and women who have deep knowledge of many aspects of its natural and human histories. Her paintings feel like a conversation about the desert – one in which we partake, a shared journey of discovery. And, as in every painting Jo Bertini has made of the desert, colour wants to overflow the confines of the canvas and run through the desert, carrying life. (Andrew Sayers, AM, former director National Museum of Australia and National Portrait Gallery of Australia.)*

*Jo Bertini is an Australian artist over the decades for whom the desert has become an essential subject, whose paintings resonate from the personal to a wider manifesto. That doesn't come easily. The struggle is not for control, for taming the desert as others might have tamed the bush - but to expose slender moments of revelation when the desert appears as it is, and the people in it are transformed through being there. The result is powerful and transformative. A few minutes alone with her paintings and the authorised, realist version of the arid landscape slips away, and we are facing the beautiful, strange desert of our imagination, once again.'*  
(Dr. Philip Jones, Senior Curator South Australian Museum.)

Jo's work is represented by Olsen Gallery, NSW and Melbourne Art Rooms (MARS Gallery), VIC.





(Anura Ben)  
wife - Jat

Bhachu  
Jamaru Jat